

Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen



Paul is the Author of *Quantrill of Missouri*, *Quantrill in Texas*, *Quantrill at Lawrence and Lost Souls of the Lost Township*. Petersen is a retired U.S. Marine Corps master sergeant and a highly decorated infantry combat veteran of the Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is a member of the William Clarke Quantrill Society, the James-Younger Gang Association, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Jackson County and Missouri State Historical Societies.

An Eye For An Eye

After the Kansas Jayhawking raids during the winter of 1861–62, many Jackson County, Missouri youths flocked to Colonel William Clarke Quantrill's camp. They were desperate to defend their homes and property, and they realized they could defend against the raids only by banding together in a Home Guard unit. Some of the first to seek out Quantrill during the winter of 1861 was twenty-two year old John T. Little from Blue Springs, Mo. and his younger sixteen-year old brother James Francis who became Quantrill's closest follower. Also listed among Quantrill's first recruits was twenty-seven year old John Koger from Oak Grove, Mo. and his twenty-four year old younger brother Edward. John Koger was said to be wounded from twelve to twenty-two times during the war. At one time there were eight bullets in his body. He extracted three of them himself with a knife. At his death he still had five bullets in his body.

During the next six months Quantrill wreaked havoc on the Federal army along the Missouri-Kansas border. His men were surrounded at the Tate House fight on March 22, 1862, but managed to fight their way out. A week later near Stony Point on March 30, Quantrill's men were again attacked by 160 Federals while resting at the Samuel Clark farm. Surrounded, the guerrillas bravely fought their way out. While the guerrillas were being pursued a Federal patrol murdered twelve-year old Theodore Blythe. Before they were able to return to Independence Quantrill ambushed the patrol killing seventeen out of thirty-eight soldiers. Seeking shelter from the rain a squad of Quantrill's men took shelter in the home of Reuben Lowe in Brooking Township. Two hundred Federals surrounded the house and opened fire at first light. Two of the guerrillas were killed and two were taken prisoner. Leaving the area for safer quarters Quantrill ordered his men to Pleasant Hill, Mo. in Cass County. On July 2, 1862, they were attacked by two-hundred and sixty Federals.

As the battle came to a close the guerrillas were reduced to fighting with rocks and clubs. Before what came to be known as the Battle of the Ravines, Quantrill had assigned half of his company to accompany Colonel Upton Hayes into Jackson County to recruit. They were camped in the deep woods surrounding the Little Blue River south of Independence, Mo.

Back in Independence City Marshal James Knowles had informed LtCol. James Buel, commanding the garrison in Independence that he knew the location of a ford over the Little Blue frequently used by Quantrill's men. It was west of the old Independence to Harrisonville road, eight miles south of Independence, at the southeastern end of the Valley of the Little Blue. Buel sent a small detachment under Capt. Aaron Thomas to sit in wait along this ford in hopes of ambushing some guerrillas. The ford was a few hundred yards east of the small hamlet of Little Blue which consisted of a store, a schoolhouse, and several homes. It wasn't long before three guerrillas rode up: George Todd, John Little, and Ed Koger. They had just returned from escorting Col. Hayes through Jackson County. Early in the morning of July 31st, the guerrillas were at the ford letting their horses drink from the stream. The guerrillas felt at ease in familiar territory with close Southern friends living nearby. Forgetting the usual vigilance known of guerrilla fighters, the three men carelessly rode too close together into the ford. They should have entered the ford cautiously, one at a time, but unconcernedly their guard was down. As they entered the ford, they stopped to let their horses drink from the stream.

Unbeknownst to them a squad of soldiers from the Federal garrison in Independence led by Sheriff Knowles were waiting in ambush. At this opportunity, Capt. Thomas led his men from their hiding places in the woods and ambushed them.

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poured a deadly volley into the group. Little and Koger were killed instantly. Todd miraculously escaped unhurt. He spurred his horse up the hill into the safety of the timber. In his fright to get away, his horse became wedged between two large boulders, which forced him to escape on foot. The Federals did not attempt to follow. It was said that from this day on, Todd became one of the most daring and desperate guerrillas to ever sit astride a horse. He feared no man and took orders from very few. The killing of his two friends heightened his hatred for any man who wore a Federal uniform.

Less than two weeks later a large Confederate force converged on the Federal garrison in Independence with Quantrill's company in the lead. Quantrill was assigned the mission of securing the jail with its provost guards as well as the Federal barracks across the street as the first objective upon entering town. George Todd and ten men rushed toward the county jail and quickly subdued the provost guards. Lt. Charles W. Meryhew, in charge of the guards at the jail, managed to fire only one volley at the charging guerrillas before he abandoned his post and fled for his life toward Kansas City.

Quantrill's intelligence information had previously informed him that Marshal Knowles was locked up in his own jail for killing an Irishman in a brawl just a few days before. Todd found him there. Knowles looked into Todd's eyes with the look of a doomed man. He confessed to piloting Buel's men to the ford where Little and Koger were killed. Todd was said to have smiled as he raised his pistols and emptied both barrels into Knowles' body. In the Commercial Hotel nearby used as a barracks for the officers, John Koger and James Little, brothers of the men earlier ambushed by the Federal patrol, captured Capt. Thomas in his hotel room. After admitting that he was in command of the ambush party and also commanded pillaging expeditions through the countryside, Thomas was shot then kicked down a flight of stairs.

This type of cruel and brutal warfare continued for the remainder of the war and to a large extent by government forces during the long years of Reconstruction. Many of Quantrill's men were hung on trumped up charges or shot down on their doorsteps in the presence of their families. Others were not permitted to return home and were forced to leave the State for safer environs.

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George Todd